

Felix Balodis #40
December 8, 1984

Q: Mr. Balodis, when did you first join the Navy?

A: I joined in 1940, July.

Q: What made you choose the Navy over, say, the Army?

A: I always loved the Navy. Somehow it seemed to be more elite than the Army.

Q: Where did you go to basic training?

A: I went to basic training in Newport, Rhode Island. While [President]Roosevelt had a ... interviewed, and we used to pick up the blimps on a patrol before the War. It was quite a thrilling experience at that boot camp at that time. We also, recommissioned the old Constellation.

Q: Oh really?

A: I slept on board that for two nights after graduation, just before we went on active duty from Newport, after leaving the Constellation, we had a train pull in and that shipped us out to the West Coast, to San Pedro. That's where all the Fleet was tied up at that time. We took the Fleet out to Pearl Harbor at that time, in 1940.

Q: What ship were you on?

A: I was put on the Helena at that time. The Helena and those bow ships that everybody just looked beautiful to go out to Hawaii at that time. All the water just lit up like a Christmas tree where they were going. So when we pulled around Hawaii there just going into Hawaii, before we get into the Harbor just around Diamond Head, it was early in the morning and you could see the hillside all lit up. It looked like a Christmas tree with all the street lights lit and the waves off the Waikiki, to me reminded of maidens running down the beach with silk scarves just following them, you know? It was a very beautiful sight. And then we operated out of Hawaii constantly; two weeks in, one week in, two weeks out. Finally, we went back to the States again. We went back to Pedro, or back to Hawaii again, until 1942...'41 when the War started. So then finally when we came back again we operated off of Hawaii; always Hawaiian waters. Anchored off in Lahaina, Lahaina Roads. It was a beautiful, beautiful place. So uh...

Q: Did the Helena usually operate by herself, or in company with...

A: She seemed to be all be herself most of the time.

Q: What was your job on the Helena?

A: Well, at first I went aboard I was in 2nd Division, a (??) sailor. And then the rates came up and opening up for strikers. I went striking for a carpenter. First I wanted to go A Division; I desired engines. So I wanted to be a diesel engineer; go down in the engine room. And my division officer was Lt. Com. Bowls. He was strictly Navy. Didn't even want anybody to whistle. Only ones he wants to whistle aboard were the boatswain mates and fools. So every time I started to do a little whistling, he stopped me. And from then on I couldn't whistle (laughter). So uh, so after from 2nd Division, I went to R Division and became a carpenters mate. He told me, he says, "Look, you cannot, Felix, you're not a below deck sailor. You're a topside sailor." So alright, I stayed topside. But still I told him, I said, "Mr. Bowls, you convinced me not to be down below decks. I should stay topside, but I still want to be off the deck. I want to go striking for something." So I went for a Carpenter's Mate. But I wanted to go in the V Division because they used to do a little flying down at Floyd Bennett Field. And I figured well I'm going to go in aviation and would like that. I looked around, but I was afraid; too many court martials. Anything anyone did wrong... court martial. Every evening they used to fire a gun for court martials for some reason or another. So one evening we heard a gun fired. Well first we heard, "pup-pup" a little machine gun go a couple of shots. Aviation mate was revving the SOC, whatever it was, and by mistake he just pressed the trigger and fired a machine gun by revving. Got a court martial. I said "Heck, I don't want that!" If I put a (??) go in V Division, put a (??) and don't secure something properly, it's going to me my skin. So I said, "The hell with it. I gotta go to carpenters shop." If I make a mistake, they always give you another piece of wood. So that kept on going. I just get transferred into R Division, the carpenters shop, and I was... still we had lookouts going. By that time we in Lahaina Roads already in a carpenters shop and uh...

Q: About what month was that?

A: I just can't.... really ...November, just before the Attack.

Q: mmhmm.

A: So uh, this time I'm in a carpenters shop transferring from 2nd Division aft, and but I was still assigned my battle station was still number two turret forward, Handling Room. So this evening, I'm out by the carpenters shop outside, just after evening meal was dusk just before the... I can't remember exactly, but I just happened to just go by the railing, and just looking down nonchalantly in the water, and I see this here black stick floating about I would say no more than 10 or 15 feet away from the ship, very close. Well, as I'm looking down, I follow it, I walk, I follow it, then finally I could see it looked like

a periscope. I said, "Periscope! How could a submarine be so close because it has a broad belly." and our hull's quite a ways down too. So I follow, follow it. Finally I see and notice it's a periscope at a little moment like. Then I started getting a little excited and I started to say, "Hey, there's this submarine alongside us fellows! There's a submarine alongside!" I'm trying to go forward up to the Bridge to make a report and they laughed me down. They said, "Ah, you're look-out happy." Well then I said, " Well, what am I going to do? If I gotta go up to the bridge and make a fool out of myself I might as well just drop it right there." But I still followed it. And the submarine passed the Quarter Deck and I kept on going forward. And that was it, I just dropped it as just a submarine.

Q: Did this happen off Lahaina?

A: Right in Lahaina Roads. We were at the anchor. So I just let it go. So that night, before we put out anchor. We were supposed to night battle target practice. So I just, new compartment and everything, I fell asleep. You know, at night I fell asleep. I don't know what time it happened, when I went back to General Quarters. So like uh, usually a ship has noise, blowers blowing or something, and all of a sudden the noise ceased and I woke up due to the silence. The silence woke me up.

Q: Where was the ship at this time.

A: It was out at sea. We were already under way. So uh, I look around and I said, "Gee, everybodys gone! What happened?" I notice everybody is in general quarters. My ship is quiet. So by the time I got down to my battle station was way up fore. I guess I would say I'm down here almost just forward of the hangar deck, so I had a lot of compartments to go through. And when I got down to my general quarters station nobody said anything. Nobody had even missed me. Mine was way down below in the ammunition handling room. Well down there I just snuck in, you know, like a little mouse. I didn't want to be noticed. I thought, hey, someone's going to court martial me for missing my battle station. So then I hear them saying, "Break out service ammunition." The gunner said, "Well, should we load?" I said, "No, don't load just hold. Hold back." And sort of a communication between the main central... I just passed it away. Didn't even say that I saw the sub anymore; just dropped it. So then, after that, we secured. The word was passed that there was an enemy sub in the vicinity. And that's when I started to think it was an enemy sub. Still, what was I going to say. It was just a strike or nothing; I kept my mouth shut from then on. Then when we pulled in the Harbor, they put us alongside a 1010 dock. Well the (??) was supposed to take that place I understand, so we stayed there. I don't know what was the reason. So the night before I remember a movie we had. It was "Hold Back Till Dawn" or something about war pictures. Someone had to go to war and they didn't want to go and they're beating the drums and say, "Well I'm patriotic now and they're attacking us, so I'm going to war." And that was the movie night before. So that night I slept in a

carpenters shop. I didn't go down to my compartment anymore. I didn't like it because it was too quiet and it was too far away from everything. I wanted to be near the action and so I stayed in the carpenters shop and I slept on a bench. So I wake up this morning and instead of going for morning breakfast, I figure well I'm going to sleep in this morning. So I slept in. I didn't go down to mess hall. I stayed on topside so I just, oh about a few minutes before 8:00, I got out at (the carpenter's shop was main deck), I just went out on the main deck and facing Ford Island I looked. And again I'm looking over the railing, just looking towards Ford Island, nice sunny day. And I just glance up and see one of the hangars going up in flames and gosh almighty, what are they doing? They making movies? I see a funny little plane flying. What are they making? Movies? They're burning this old hangar down. Hmmm. Hesitating. Then all of a sudden the little plane made a turn, veered to the left and hit another hangar! Another hangar goes BOOF up into the air, in flames. I said, "God Almighty! Fire Rescue party." So I'm going back and forth just like a bird just weaving. I didn't know what to do... run in and holler away, "Fire Rescue Party" or what! And then I see another shiny plane with a little red ball on it is going, flying right low. So then another bomb hit. It hit the PBY's on the pad, and when it hit the PBY's, hit on the pad, all that junk came up towards the ship. I said, "This is it." and I just ran towards the shop. As I enter the shop, just about in the shop, they hollered, "General Quarters! All hands man battle stations! Japs attacking Ford Island!" I said, "That's it." so I ran out. All I had was my shoes, skivvys. Well, I grabbed my shoes; I don't know what happened, but I wound up right about library area, midships.

Q: Is this on main deck still?

A: No and then from main deck at my battle station, I had to go one deck below, go forward and through warrant "officers country" into fore. My battle station at that time was transferred, changed, from magazine to anchor windlass way up forward; just forward anchor windlass - warrant officers country.

Q: Which deck was that on?

A: That was the second deck.

Q: Second deck.

A: Deck below main. So I'm going to the battle station. As I left my carpenters shop I just about hit midships by library. Now just there was a ladder going down from main deck to the library area. And then going through a passage way, doorway. Another ladder would lead you down to mess deck, and right there was a trunk coming up from main engine room. Right on the deck was also engineering office. Well, I didn't even get through the deck. I just came up to this passage way leading to the next compartment from library when it got hit. I don't know how many men in front of me, I would say about 3 or 4, or maybe... I don't

know, I just could see they were white men. I know the men looked in white, and all of a sudden "WHOOV" the lights went out and a air blasted me somehow to jolt below, knocked me off my feet. And uh, I spun like a yo yo.

Then the flames; I could see the flames come up, and I tried to get myself off and I scratched the deck. They said I even scratched that deck, the red deck was scratched with my fingernails. I tried to get away from the flames because I was spinning around on the deck. I couldn't move... the vibration, and the flames coming up. So, I scratched the deck and I didn't even know it. There was a fellow by the name of Bernacki (??), he had his cleaning station and if someone scratched the deck... boy he really scratched it. I said that was I. I tried to get out of the flames. The ship was bouncing and I tried ... the only thing, I got caught, my legs were caught in the flames. So my legs were burned. But I didn't even know I was burned until 12:00 that night.

But when everything ceased, all the vibration, I looked and all of these men in front, they were all charcoal black. I said, "What the heck these men. These are not mess attendants. They're supposed to be white. And they were mess attendants. I just totally lost my mind somehow. My thoughts went right back to my childhood, what I did or didn't do, and what not. The ship is blowing up. I said, "This is it." I didn't know what happened. So somehow when I got myself woven together, instead of going forward, the lights went out, I couldn't go forward and I didn't have shoes on. I was barefooted. And they said, "You can not go bare footed on deck." because they can become so hot that you can burn your feet. So I have no shoes. I lost my shoes. So uh, I go up on main deck, have to go up. I didn't know, I'm just going around in circles, dazed, where are we.

So seeing the Oglala, I said, "Well I'm going to have to go jump in between." I said, "What do I want to go jump in between the Oglala for. We're along side. I'm gonna go on board the Oglala. I didn't know what was going on. So I didn't go on the Oglala. I said, "Hey, we're along side the dock." So I didn't go over to the Oglala then. I didn't know what to do anymore. I was just so confused. So I finally go on the other side of the ship along side the dock, and there I see this one fellow named (he was at a bar where they called him 'Red') and he was burned. All his skivvys were burned off. Just all he had was burning. The seam of his skivvy shirt was still burning, and I see him. Fellows recognize him, but I couldn't recognize him. "Say hi y Red" what...what. So he just mumbled something. So the fellow went off and pulled this here part of his left shoulder skivvy shirt that was burning yet.

And so finally I said I still have to go back to my battle station, but how am I going to get forward. Because you had to go below decks and over. So finally, an officer came along with a flashlight and I followed him, led on through, and went to my battle station, which was up to anchor windlass, just forward up in back of after anchor windlass. So I got there and my partner was another carpenters neighbor. He was a painter, a fellow by the name of Sandy Bake. And I said, "Hi Sandy!" So he looked like an Indian. He slept in the paint shop. And when it hit, that bar whipped and knocked all the paint off and fell on top of

his head. He looked like a Cherokee Indian, all black, red, (laughter) red deck and what-not on him... white. So I didn't even notice that he had a little cut on his head. A paint can fell on top of his head; hit him.

So he's with me. And there we both were standing there next to each other and "General Quarters!" Then after general quarters, "Gas attack!" So we put the masks on to secure gas attack. "Gas attack!" We didn't know what the hell to do. Well all we could hear on topside, we had .50 [caliber] machine guns. The Marines manned the .50 caliber machine guns. They were on wheels, so I could hear them, "There's one!" "Hey, we got one! We got one!" and pow pow pow, they're hittin'... boom, they're hittin'. We didn't know what was going on topside. All we could hear, "We got one!"

So finally, I don't know what time it was, when the shooting secured, they told us pass the word down to our area to take soundings(??) if any water damage. So...

Q: Take what?

A: Take soundings... soundings of the voids(???), see. So, I go up. I just took the sounding watch about, I don't know, a few days before, and I went down to that compartment area. I know exactly where the sounding was. So I go up to look for how I could take the sounding but the whole deck was filled with paint. Paint was just knocked down and just flooded that whole deck. There must have 6 or 8 inches of paint floating around this deck. I couldn't take the soundings. But mean time when I looked up I see a hatch open. Actually they dog down from topside. It couldn't open it from down below decks and I was left open. So when I climbed up the ladder to look outside, God Almighty, my fingers went numb and you know when they say your rectum just shrivels, (you don't know if you have one...) So that's what happened to me. I just looked out. It was all hell. I was afraid to think of anything else. I said gee anymore and I wouldn't have any strength in my fingers to come down the ladder. So I went back...

Q: What did you see when you looked out?

A: I looked out... if anyone's been in hell, I said, "This is hell!" All black smoke. I felt like we were in a hole... a black hole. The Pennsy [Pennsylvania] burning, the battleships burning, and something's burning over here around us, and all that black smoke right in the middle. I said, "God Almighty!" So I went back and I said, "Sandy, you better go out there and take a look. We're in hell." So Sandy comes back and that was it. We couldn't talk anymore. From there on, I can't remember what the hell I did that day... just... the day kept on going... just like a dream. All I remember, that evening, when evening meal came along, they had chili and beans, or bean something. And mess hall you couldn't eat so we ate wherever we could, and we ate topside. And no wash or whatever; you finish the bowl of beans you just gave the bowl to someone else. He went out and filled out the same bowl with his... didn't have no scullery or

anything. That was that day, and then we just.... oh yeah, that day.

So the following night... the same night I mean, not the following night; the same day but it was about 12:00 midnight, I had the mid watch. So I'm on mid watch in Repair One forward and I looked down at my feet because I didn't have no shoes but I picked up a big pair of shoes. We had a fellow by the name of Stan Peen(??) on the battle station with us, but he was not at our battle station. He was a painter and he had his shoes there, so I took his shoes. I wear a size 7 1/2 and he wears size 12, so I wear them all day. And at night on my watch I feel my feet sore. God Almighty! And here I'm going around with these big clod hoppers all day long. I thought maybe the shoes wore me out. So the battle station was set up, the battle dressing station was wardroom. Well being mid watch, I didn't have anything else to do; I just relaxed myself and I started looking down at my legs... my shoes. I said, "Jeez, they're sore." and all looked dirty, like dark from soot. So I said to the corpsman, my feet are sore... kind of funny. So he said, "O.K. sit down and let me take a look at it. Gee, you're burned." I had a second degree burn and didn't even notice it. That whole night, legs here. I've still got my dark marks. I thought the shoes did it but I was burned. I just couldn't get out of the flames when I got hit.

So, he said, "You're burned." So he put the salve on; get my feet all squared away. Like I say, I didn't pay attention. But I didn't even go to a hospital. I just stayed on board. So I was one of the first casualties that didn't go to a hospital. I'm lucky that I wasn't burned. It was just about a split second; I probably wouldn't have been here. The fellows that were in the front of my path... in front of me... they're not here any more. They were so burned that they charred black. That was that day... that night. So I kept on going.

Christmas came around. We were... shrapnel... clean up the ship. I picked up a piece of shrapnel. I still have it. Then we had another fellow that was (I don't know if he ever said it) he was so lucky to get out during that attack. We had a forward engine room blown out. We had to set up a secondary fire main. So this here fellow who was in charge of the fire hose, he had a compartment... a fire hose compartment and he asked, go and get the fire hose. So he goes down to get the fire hose in the compartment. As he's leaning over the fire to pick up the firehose, all of a sudden he has a little "clackity bang" something. And right behind him there was a mirror. The shrapnel went right through the mirror in through the blower. It fell down into the blower hole. That's where he heard the clack and he was just leaning over. It just missed him. And if he would have stayed, it would have been somewhere around his shoulder or head height. He was just lucky; just a few seconds that saved him.

Now what else... so they came and we kept on going. Then Christmas came around. Our boats had shrapnel holes. We had to fix up the boats again. A place called... they had a, called a 'tin roof' so nearby. So we were working by the 'tin roof' area and...

Q: Was that on 1010 dock?

A: 1010 dock. So we're working on our boats. So we had to ask the Chief, "Hey, now it's Christmas. What are we going to do for Christmas?" He says, "Christmas hell, it's just another day." So we worked and worked and worked till finally they gave us availability at Number 1 dock to go into dry dock. So we go into the dry dock, took a couple days to fill it and so on. So we got over there, and we were all scared chickens. Heads were secured. We had to go on top outside on the dock to a head. Afraid to light a cigarette and we were all jumpy.

They gave us sort of a 'liberty' or something the first days. You could go somewhere if you wanted to. So they gave us 'liberty'. I said O.K. I'm going to go to a Naval hospital to see if I can find any of my buddies. So I put my dress whites on and going over to the hospital. As I'm going through the... I pass the Downes, and the other destroyer, and the Pensy [Pennsylvania]. They all burned up. I go across the tennis courts by the hospital grounds. There's a pit where that Jap plane was shot down and he landed in the hospital grounds.

Then I go into the ward and I see this man laying all over. I could smell the burned flesh. I look at the guys...(overcome with emotion) ...guys are in the ward you know. (difficult to understand)... burned... burned flesh. God...you better stop that thing. So I see this burned flesh smelling and finally I come to a bed, and the fellows in the plastic cover and he's mumbling, eyes all gray-like. And I say,"Temkowski(??) gee. Here he is." But he couldn't recognize me. Then I felt kind of bad. I said, "Gee, I better not go looking around for any more men. Because they may recognize me but I may not recognize them anymore." So I said, "No." I just walked right out with a very sick feeling.

Then I got down, bypass again the tennis court. I picked up the piece of that Jap plane that landed there. It was sort of perforated piece of metal. And I go again past those aisles, the ammunition on the dock, the smell of oil and everything else, and the smell of flesh got me so sick. Then I carried that piece and while going back to the ship I didn't know what to do with that piece. I didn't want to hold it. I didn't want to possess it. I didn't know how to dispose of it. Where would be the most dirtiest place to dispose of it? If there had been a cesspool that was loaded with maggots, I would have buried it. The only dirty place that I could come upon was a garbage can after an old discarded meal. So the garbage cans were filled and I just took that piece of metal and I shoved it in that garbage can. And I said, "That's it of my souvenir."

So that kept on going. From there on we came back to the states, went to Cornell. I got off the ship. I kept on going. So from there on I went on another ship with new construction. It was in battle damage repair. I kept on going Peleliu, Iwo, Okinawa, until the War ended. I came around Diamond Head. Was just about going around Diamond Head when the War ended.

Q: Wow...

A: So that was all my war. I could probably tell you more about other things. That was all on the Helena.

Q: Well, it sounds like your war ended just about where it began.

A: Where I begun. I got down to Iwo Jima on the beach. In fact, I watched the flag raised at Surabachi. I got it on my records.

Q: Oh yeah.

A: I could ride off the foot of Surabachi that morning and I see this here flag come up and I said, "Hey, there goes the flag." and I screamed like hell. And then everybody watched the flag there and they sent our records too. So I finished Iwo in March and then from there we went to Okinawa. Finished that. And then, we didn't know where we were going to go. We wound up in Leyte, and gosh most of the guys were homesick. And I myself, I wasn't exactly homesick, I was constipated. You want it for the record. I couldn't... everybody complained about stomachs so hell, during that time you couldn't take any clothes off. Like Okinawa, bogies used to come in and work seven hour shifts; from 7 to 7, 7 to 7, and at night you couldn't even take your clothes off. You just had your clothes on. If you went to the head and the next thing you know, General Quarters went, you just grabbed your pants and ran. You could hardly go to the head.

So when we got down to Leyte, my stomach felt kind of lumpy. I said, "Gee, I better take a check with the corpsman. Maybe he can do something to clear me up." I was constipated. So doctor hears me. "Hey, I want to see you." Alright, he sees me and they give me enema. I didn't know what the heck to do with the damn thing.(laughter) I had it. He said... (tape ends)